



State of Connecticut

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STATE CAPITOL

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February 16, 2021 * 12:00pm * Zoom

Testimony on Proposed SB 167 AN ACT CONCERNING THE DISPOSITION OF THE FORMER SEASIDE SANATORIUM FACILITY.

Dear Chairmen Hartley and Simmons, Ranking Members Martin and Buckbee, and distinguished members of the Commerce Committee:

Thank you very much for this opportunity to submit written testimony on Proposed **SB No. 167 An Act Concerning the Disposition of the Former Seaside Sanatorium Facility**.

My name is Kathleen McCarty and I am the State Representative of Waterford and a portion of Montville. The subject of this committee hearing is the disposition of the historic Cass Gilbert building(s) which are located at Seaside State Park in my neighborhood, and in my home community of Waterford.

Let me begin by stating that this waterfront property is truly an amazing, cultural, and historical site that has tremendous importance to my community and to the State of Connecticut. A visit to this breathtaking 32 acre property situated along Long Island Sound replete with its historic buildings is truly warranted in order to appreciate its unique value, beauty, and historic and cultural significance. Having said that, the historic buildings on the state-owned property have been in need of attention and repair for several decades.

For the edification of the Commerce Committee members, the following is a very quick synopsis of the former uses of this seaside property. The Seaside facility was designed by the famed architect Cass Gilbert in 1936. It was first used as a healing place for children with tuberculosis, followed by a home for the elderly, a medical hospital, and finally as a facility for Individuals with Disability. The facility closed in 1991 and the building has remained vacant for over twenty-five years. In 1995 Seaside was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

During an extensive 15 year time period the State was under contract with a private developer regarding the Seaside property. In 2014 after the private developer failed to obtain the necessary zoning approvals

from the local Planning and Zoning Commission for his amended development plans, the State of Connecticut declared the property as a new state park.

Subsequently, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection held numerous informational hearings in the town of Waterford regarding the property and developed several scenarios for the best use of Seaside State Park and its buildings. Several concepts were introduced to Waterford's residents that included a: Destination Park, Ecological Park, Passive Park, and Hybrid Park.

In 2017, based upon the Environmental Impact Study and equipped with written testimony from Waterford residents the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection decided that a Destination Park would be the preferred plan. This plan respected the will of the preponderance of the Waterford community (more than 80 % of the respondents favored restoration of the historic buildings in a park setting).

The Destination Park entailed a public/private partnership for a 63 room lodge, and restoration of all of the existing buildings as well as the enhancement of the waterfront for ecological and recreational purposes with the state retaining ownership of the property through a long-term leasing agreement.

An RFP was issued in July of 2018. The State was not successful in obtaining any viable bids that met the requirements of the Destination Park concept. Since that time the Seaside property has remained a passive state park.

Over the past twenty years I have been actively engaged in every meeting concerning the state owned Seaside property. I have followed diligently development plans by the private developer as well as the concept plans designed by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

The above timeline and development initiatives bring us to the legislative proposal SB 167, before the Commerce Committee today. I am supportive of the Department of Economic and Community Development establishing and reopening an RFP process in another attempt to find a developer with the necessary financial resources to restore and reuse the historic building(s) and for the state to maintain most of the adjacent land as a state park. Such a public private partnership scenario would benefit both the town, and its tax base while preserving at the same time the majority of the property and its shoreline for the enjoyment and use by the public, and Waterford's residents. These terms would need to be identified and specified in the RFP. Currently, the Seaside State Park is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

I will state for the record that I am adamantly opposed to any large commercial development on the Seaside property that eliminates the state park and access by the public to its shoreline.

However, I am interested in an RFP initiated by the Department of Economic and Community Development that explores the feasibility of a moderate development proposal preferably using and restoring the existing historic buildings. In my opinion, a proposal that balances continued use of the property as a state park with the preservation and adaptive reuse of the historic buildings which may entail a variety of uses is worthy of further exploration.

One final comment is in order, any new development plan concerning a portion of Seaside State Park and its buildings, whether it be by the state through a leasing of the property or a sale of a portion of the property to a private developer must adhere to Waterford's 2011 Plan of Conservation, and Development. A plan that respects the character of and is compatible with the community and the neighborhood. Again, in my view, only a very moderate development plan that preserves the historic buildings and honors the adjacent property as a state park should be considered.

Waterford needs to continue to seek a repurposing and development of the Crystal Mall, and a 186 acre property that was formerly an airport in order to protect and enhance its tax base. Fortunately, our First Selectman is actively engaged in finding solutions to redevelop these two major properties in Waterford.

In conclusion, as the state representative for Waterford, I would like to ensure that the voices of my constituents are heard and respected by state government by offering them the opportunity and ample time to comment on any new proposal related to any sort of development of the Seaside property. Inter-state agency cooperation to redetermine if there is a possibility to preserve the historic buildings while maintaining most of the adjacent land as a state park for the enjoyment of the public is also necessary to move this proposal forward.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely yours,



Kathleen M. McCarty
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Waterford, Montville